

Research Note

Concept-Based Curricula: A Framework for Curriculum Development

コンセプトベースのカリキュラム： カリキュラム開発の枠組みとして

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Key words:

コンテンツベース授業、コンテンツベース教育、カリキュラム開発

Content-Based Instruction, curriculum development

Abstract

This paper describes the process by which the author developed the curriculum for a content-based instruction (CBI) course in International Relations that he has been teaching and evolving over the last three years. The paper suggests that content-based courses can be seen as existing on a spectrum ranging from low to high levels of conceptual complexity, and then offers a framework that emerged from his own experience of teaching a relatively high-concept CBI course; it further suggests that the author's framework can be used to develop other courses across a variety of subjects, in order to ameliorate the perceived shortfall in teaching materials for conceptually complex CBI courses.

1. Introduction

Content-Based Instruction (CBI) can take many forms, and so is a difficult term to define precisely. CBI can be considered on a scale measuring the complexity of the content being taught, with one end of the scale involving the use of a consistent but conceptually simple theme to integrate the teaching of discrete skill areas (for example, contrasting aspects of daily life between the students' home country and a foreign country, or using business-based role-plays to teach conversation skills), and the other end involving teaching relatively advanced concepts to Second Language speakers (for example, university-level academic content). These two ends of the scale will be referred to here as low concept CBI and high concept CBI, respectively. There are an increasing number of textbooks suitable for the former, low concept, type course, but a dearth of material that would be suitable for teaching high concept courses in subjects such as international relations, economics or poetry. The result is that teachers are often forced to develop their own syllabi, in their own specialized fields or areas of interest, from the ground up. This article suggests a process for developing high concept CBI syllabi that facilitates the development process while overcoming some of the common difficulties.

One option for teachers in this situation is to take a textbook designed for native speakers of the target language and modify it for their students' language level, although this is often unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. Firstly, such texts usually strive to be comprehensive and therefore contain far more material than non-native students can usually cover in a given course. On the other hand, just using a few chapters from the textbook does not usually provide enough diversity or depth to make for an interesting course. Additionally, textbooks often introduce a lot of jargon and attempt to explain sophisticated concepts in dry and difficult language. Second language students may be incapable of understanding or absorbing most of this material, and simplifying the language may strip away the meaning of the original source. In short, there is an innate tension between presenting the material that students need to know in order to understand the field of study, and presenting information at a level that students can grasp in terms of language, cognition and retention.

If existing textbooks prove to be inadequate for structuring a high concept CBI course, instructors can provide a sampling of topics from their specialized field, covering each topic over one or more weeks. This can be more effective, but the individual units may lack cohesion as an integrated course, and the students may struggle to discern the connections between the individual units, or to build on the knowledge and skills gained in previous units. Some courses developed in this way will achieve the goals of the students and the instructors, but the results will likely be inconsistent when the courses

are developed in such an ad hoc manner. Teaching high concept CBI would be easier and more effective if there were a framework for developing curricula.

2. CBC: Concept as Organizing Principle

Over the course of three semesters, between April 2007 and January 2010, the author has been teaching a high concept CBI course to first and second-year students at the University of Tokyo's Komaba campus. The course, entitled *Understanding International Relations*, aims to introduce students to the study of international relations (IR), history and politics through an integrated program of reading, writing and class discussion. Over this three-year period, the course has evolved, becoming more coherent, better organized and more effective in improving the students' ability to understand important ideas in the field and analyze contemporary and historical international events. At the heart of this evolution, has been an emerging framework for organizing the content side of the course. This framework, referred to here as Concept-Based Curricula (CBC), is a three stage system for developing curricula for high concept CBI classes. It is suggested here as a potentially useful tool for others who are trying to teach richer conceptual material to Second Language students in any academic specialty.

The main idea behind CBC is that university students will benefit more from learning the kinds of sophisticated concepts that can be used to understand a wide range of cases in a particular field than they will from merely learning names, dates, or academic jargon. Additionally, if students choose to study further in that field in their first language, a conceptual grasp of the subject matter will be more useful to them than anything else. On the basis of this assumption, the first step of developing Concept-Based Curricula is to identify a Core Concept in the field in question. The basic structure of the course will be oriented around this concept, providing coherence to the curriculum. Ideally, the chosen concept should meet the following criteria:

- Central to the field of study
- Dense enough to be studied at length over an entire semester
- Diverse enough to be applied to several different topics throughout the course
- Useful as an analytical tool for the students

Examples of theoretical concepts in the field of International Relations that meet these criteria include security, international law, environmental sustainability, and constructivism, among others. Topics that are not theoretical in nature, but which are 'big ideas' that could still meet these criteria include American political history (with a focus

on what historical, social and political actors make that country unique) and the causes of war (predicated on the understanding that certain factors have been necessary or sufficient causes of war in some cases but not others). In any branch of the social sciences, and presumably the natural sciences as well, there are a wealth of concepts that are sufficiently rich to meet these criteria and serve as the organizing principle for CBC. For the *Understanding International Relations* course, the topic of security was chosen, as it is a central theme of IR theory, can be considered from many dimensions, and is a valuable conceptual tool for understanding a wide range of international political situations. In short, it meets all of the above criteria.

2. 1. Implementation

Once the Core Concept has been determined, it is necessary to break it down into a series of conceptually easier points, each of which will be the focus of a class. These are the principal learning objectives, which will be referred to here as the key Takeaways. Each Takeaway represents an important layer or facet of the core concept, and the primary purpose of each individual class is for the students to reach an understanding of that Takeaway. Taken together, the Takeaways should provide the students with a deep and textured understanding of the Core Concept; this is, on its own, a highly worthwhile outcome for any course, and should occur in addition to the language skills and other knowledge that the students acquire in class.

Selecting desirable Takeaways for a course involves identifying the essential ideas that students would need to grasp in order to truly understand the Core Concept. For example, if one were teaching a course on international law, it would be essential that the students understood such Takeaways as:

- Sovereignty
- The role of international law in integrating and standardizing shared practices
- The formation and role of international institutions
- The importance of international law in generating norms

Similarly, if the topic were environmental sustainability, it would be essential that the students understood such Takeaways as:

- The impact of industrialization
- The relationship between means of production, pollution and living patterns
- The cross border nature of pollution
- The dangers of water depletion

Each of these Takeaways is absolutely fundamental to an understanding of the Core Concept, and so the curriculum for a high concept course should be designed to ensure that the students are able to understand them. CBC works by putting the main ideas at the forefront of curriculum development.

Table 1, below, outlines the actual course structure of the *Understanding International Relations* detailing the themes, reading topics and Key Takeaways for up to 12 weeks of regular classes (not including orientation, presentation days and so on). An important part of arranging the Takeaways is that the lessons should be sequenced in such a way that each class builds on understanding that the students developed in previous classes. In this case, the course follows to some extent the development of the theory of security, from traditional Realist approaches that deal with military security, through the changes in the nature of war and weapons in the twentieth century to the growth of Critical Security Studies, which questions every element of the 'State A threatens State B with force' paradigm. As the students follow this intellectual history, they are able to apply many of the same lessons about how actors respond to threats that they learned in previous lessons. As they do so, they continually expand their understanding of where the threats come from and who the actors are, developing a much more nuanced understanding of the Core Concept.

Table 1. Outline of *Understanding International Relations* course, as taught in Winter semester, 2009.

	Theme	Sample Topic	Key Takeaway
Week 1	Introduction to IR	US Policies toward Afghanistan and Iran	Complexity
Week 2	Social Science Theories	Theory of International Politics	Explanatory Variables
Week 3	Causes of War	Does Religion Cause Violence?	Challenging Popular Beliefs
Week 4	Conventional Security	China's Rising Military Budget	How Countries Achieve Security
Week 5	Nuclear Security	North Korea's Nuclear Program	The Security Dilemma
Week 6	Military Strategy	American Power Projection vs. China's Area Denial	Differing Conceptions of Security
Week 7	Cyber Warfare	Russian Cyber Attacks Against Georgia	Changing Sources of Security Threats
Week 8	Environmental Security	The Lessons of Hurricane Katrina	Changing Targets of Security Threats
Week 9	Environmental Security	Global Climate Change	Securitization
Week 10	Human Security	International Response to Darfur	Limitations of State-Centric Security
Week 11	Force vs. Diplomacy	Reliance on Force in the Middle East	Limits to the Utility of Force
Week 12	The United Nations	UN Responds to Global Challenges	Role of International Organizations

2. 2. Delivery

As mentioned above, CBC is a three stage process; however, only the first two steps (selecting the Core Concept and then developing a progression of Takeaways for each class) can be completed outside of class. The third part of this system involves ensuring delivery of the Takeaways to the students, and combines preparation with in-class activities.¹⁾ As the key Takeaways are analytical tools, it is believed that students are more likely to truly learn and internalize these lessons when they are faced with situations that can only be successfully analyzed with these tools. In other words, rather than describing these tools in a lecture, it is more desirable to put the students in a position to invent those tools themselves. For example, rather than telling students that news sources should be read critically, they should be given a news story which presents an opinion that they are likely to disagree with as fact; they will soon identify the writer's bias and develop their own theories to explain it. At this point, it will usually be easier for the students to identify their own biases, and they will understand at a deeper level the need to read other texts more critically. Ensuring that this realization of the Takeaways is achieved by every student in each class is the third part of the CBC system.

Before class, it is necessary that whatever materials are used be oriented towards the Takeaways; the ideal is to strike a balance between allowing the students to discover the Takeaway themselves from the materials and presenting the materials in a way that leads them naturally towards this conclusion. The materials should not make the Takeaways obvious, but should not lend themselves too easily to other interpretations. As an example of how to achieve this balance, a magazine article that discussed North Korea's nuclear weapons program was used to illustrate the nature of the Security Dilemma. When asking why North Korea decided to pursue a nuclear weapons progress, the article alluded to the use of nuclear weapons as a bargaining chip, as well as describing the internal political rivalries in Pyongyang and the perceptions of isolation. In this way, the students are forced to look beyond simple and unsatisfying explanations in terms of character (e.g. "North Korea is a bad country") or personality (e.g. "Kim Jong-Il is crazy"), and realize that North Korea has legitimate security concerns of its own. The original article was four pages long and made a number of points, including the Japanese domestic political dispute about constitutional amendments, the humanitarian crisis in North Korea and the South Korean media's backlash against the test. All of these points were interesting, but by removing them, the article was reduced to a more manageable length and became much more focused on the North Korean security situation and the possible international reactions to the program; these two points are the essence of the Security Dilemma, and so focus students attention on building their understanding of the

Takeaway. When adapting pre-existing materials to the course, the instructor must always ensure the focus of the material.

During the class, the instructor functions as a guide, asking questions and offering alternative points of view with the primary purpose of helping the students to arrive at the Takeaway. The Socratic method should be used rather than lecturing the students or telling them what to think. From the experience gained teaching *Understanding International Relations*, using hypothetical questions is recommended, and when using cases about foreign countries or contexts, asking questions about parallel situations in a context with which the students are more familiar can be particularly effective. In-class assessments and discussions should provide the students the opportunity to articulate their understanding of the Takeaway, and at the same time must provide the instructor with the feedback necessary to ensure the understanding of the whole class. Only once the instructor is confident that the whole class has grasped the Takeaway should they move on to other topics.

3. Conclusion

High concept CBI offers advantages to both students and instructors, including increasing variety and intellectual challenge. Additionally, in the university context, it may be possible to reduce the trade-off between language courses and other credit courses that students may need to complete their major. With a strong focus on a central concept, it is possible for students to learn advanced concepts in a second language environment, while utilizing their language skills in new ways. Hopefully, the Concept-Based Curricula framework presented here will be a useful way for other instructors to achieve these goals.

Notes

- 1) As the CBC framework deals only with the content side of the class, it is neutral with regards to teaching methods, so how these Takeaways are conveyed to the students is up to the instructor, and is a matter of skill focus and other class requirements. *Understanding International Politics* was a reading-based course, and the students were given readings from various sources (usually 2 A4-sized pages adapted from newspaper articles), but these details will be different for every class.

References

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